

# 'I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus,' Christian Writer Says

## In the News

Debie Thomas is director of children's and family ministries at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, and so when she wrote recently in a national Christian magazine that she doesn't have a "personal relationship with Jesus," it may have given some people pause.

But it's important to hear her explanation before dismissing her as someone who hasn't responded to the call of God. In her essay, she goes on to say that she feels a connection with God or Jesus through the community of the church. Thus, she's not saying she doesn't have a relationship with Jesus *at all*, but that she doesn't experience it as something one-on-one, personal or intimate.

Thomas tells that when growing up in the church, "a personal relationship with God" was the primary way Christians she knew described their faith. "The idea was everywhere in our Sunday morning music," Thomas says, "which often sounded like love songs. It was ubiquitous in sermons and in the favorite spiritual expressions of my fellow churchgoers: 'Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.' 'Jesus is my best friend.' 'God walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own.'"

Thomas also says that eventually she was "stunned" when she learned that the phrase "personal relationship" does not come from the Bible.

"Nor does the Bible ever instruct me to 'invite Jesus into my heart as my personal Savior,'" Thomas adds.

But before learning any of that, Thomas says, she spent many years "feeling spiritually deficient" because she didn't -- and still doesn't -- have a personal relationship with God.

"I've certainly hungered for the kind of intimacy I sang about so earnestly as a child and young adult," Thomas says. "But to claim that I experience a one-on-one intimacy with God that is truly personal would be a lie. God doesn't walk with me and talk with me and tell me I am God's own. I don't feel God's arms holding me close. Jesus is not my best friend."

Still, Thomas experiences God's presence and power in the shared worship, liturgy, song and prayer of the believing people of the church community. "My spiritual bedrock is not a personal relationship with God; it's the mystery of the incarnation, fleshed out in embodied community," she says. "It's in the faces, voices, hands, and feet of the body of Christ that I experience Christ. It's in the laughter of other people that I hear God's joy. It's in the tears of other people that I see God's broken heart. It's in messy human connection that God's redeeming love streams into my life."

Despite her own experience, however, Thomas does not deny the claims of Christians who say they "enjoy deep, one-on-one intimacy with their Creator." And she acknowledges that even now, with all she has since learned, "it still feels scandalous to admit that I don't have a personal relationship with God."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus. \*The Christian Century\*](#)

[Christianity Is Not About a Personal Relationship with Jesus. \*1517\*](#)

[Answers. \*Billy Graham Evangelistic Association\*](#)

## Applying the News Story

Debie Thomas is correct that the phrase "personal relationship" does not appear in the Bible and that the scriptures never instruct us to "invite Jesus into our heart as our personal Savior." There are, nonetheless, Bible passages that can be read as pointing in the direction of a personal connection (see our "Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope" section below).

Even with such Bible verses before us, however, we can ask whether the idea of a personal relationship with God or Jesus was intended to be understood literally or as something more like a metaphor -- or perhaps even some of both. It's certainly true that a personal God -- which is a clear biblical teaching -- is much easier to relate to than some impersonal "Force" that governs the universe. But it's also fair to ask whether given the vast diversity of human beings, it's even reasonable to expect that everyone can or even should relate to God in the same way. Or maybe we should reverse this: Given the vast diversity of human beings created by God, is it reasonable to expect that *he* should relate to each one in exactly the same way?

So an exploration of what is meant by "a personal relationship with God/Jesus" will be our endeavor in this lesson.

### **The Big Questions**

1. Does God relate to everybody the same way? Does he expect everybody to relate to him in a personal, intimate way? Explain your answer.
2. Is knowing God on a personal level more a metaphor or an actual experience? Can it be both? Can it vary from person to person? Explain your thinking.
3. Is Jesus your buddy? If your answer is "Yes," explain what you mean. If your answer is "No," explain why not. Is it possible that picturing Jesus as a close friend diminishes who he really is? How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
4. What is the difference between *knowing about* God and *knowing* him? Might the latter be described as a personal relationship? Why or why not?
5. Is it possible that a person who experiences Christ in the laughter and tears of other people actually has a *more* intimate connection with God than someone who does not experience Christ that way?
6. From the "In the News" section above, read again the paragraph beginning "Still, Thomas experiences God's presence ..." and say how nearly Thomas' words describe your own experience. In terms of being a follower of Jesus, is it *necessary* that your experience of God be personal and intimate? Why or why not?